

Recommendations for Improvements  
in  
Food Stamp Nutrition Education  
within the 2007 Farm Bill

Statement of the California Department of Health Services  
to the  
Food and Nutrition Service  
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from the  
California Department of Health Services**

**Introduction**

The Department of Health Services (DHS) comments will focus on Food Stamp Nutrition Education (FSNE), an optional state activity that in California is overseen by the California Department of Social Services (DSS) and delivered through interagency agreements with DHS and the University of California. Our long and valuable partnership with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has provided the opportunity to establish nationally recognized programs that are accountable and focused on results. DHS will highlight some of this innovative work being supported through FSNE matching funds and recommend program improvements and changes through the Farm Bill that could greatly strengthen program delivery and outcomes nationwide, and here in California, help to realize Governor Schwarzenegger's vision for health, nutrition and obesity prevention. California's goals mirror those of HealthierUS.

**The Challenge of Overweight, Obesity and Food Insecurity**

The 2007 Farm Bill is vital to California because of the important role that farming and agriculture play in our state. California's agricultural products feed our nation and are enjoyed throughout the world. Yet behind the common image of a bountiful and healthy harvest there is an irony – a public health challenge of overweight and obesity coupled with food insecurity - that is familiar throughout the United States.

Obesity – caused by poor diet and physical inactivity – is arguably the leading public health challenge facing California today, and it has its greatest impact on low-income families and communities of color. In 2003, well over half of California adults were overweight or obese, up by more than ten percent since the early 1990s. These rates were as much as ten percent higher among FSNE-eligible persons. Among California's 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> graders in 2001, over 25 percent were overweight, and almost 40 percent were physically unfit. Other data from 2004 suggest that rates of overweight may be rising even more precipitously among Latino and African-American youth.

The obesity epidemic is also an economic crisis for states. In April the California Department of Health Services released *Economic Costs of Physical Inactivity, Obesity and Overweight in California Adults: Health Care, Workers' Compensation, and Lost Productivity* which revealed that by the end of 2005, physical inactivity, obesity, and overweight would cost California health insurers, businesses, and individuals \$28 billion, half of it through lost productivity at work.

Less well known but central to this Forum is California's high level of food insecurity. The University of California, Los Angeles, reported in May that more than 2.9 million low-income Californians in 2003 experienced periods during the year when they could

not afford to put food on the table or had to forego other basic needs in order to do so. This was one-third of California adults with annual incomes under 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), and a 5 percentage point increase since 2001. This could be corrected if more California families were participating in the range of federal nutrition assistance programs to which they are entitled by law, and Food Stamps is the centerpiece. People cannot eat healthy, and rates of obesity cannot be lowered, if they do not have enough and the right kinds of food to eat.

### **Governor Schwarzenegger's Vision for a Healthy California**

To address these issues, Governor Schwarzenegger has challenged our state to become the first to achieve aggressive goals for healthy eating and active living and to reverse the obesity epidemic. On September 15, the Governor convened a Summit with 150 leaders from business and health, arts and entertainment, and the food and fitness industries who agreed with the principle that all sectors—business, non-profit and government—must become part of the solution. His vision is to make healthy eating and physical activity part of everyday life for all Californians – for healthy school and worksite environments with healthier food and beverages and more opportunities for physical activity; affordable produce and easy retail access to other fresh, healthy foods available in all neighborhoods; more access to obesity prevention services in public and private health insurance; community-based projects that implement environmental changes in schools, workplaces and restaurants; and a well-informed public that wants to make healthier choices.

The Governor has taken action by working with the California Legislature to limit the availability of junk foods in California schools, expand restrictions on beverages, including soda, to high schools, and to offer more fresh fruits and vegetables in schools through breakfast and snacks. These bills address children's need for healthy school environments, and they lay the groundwork for future state and local efforts to promote healthy eating and physical activity more broadly. The Governor's approach is comprehensive and FSNE plays a crucial role in improving the diets for FSNE-eligible California families with children, about seven million persons.

### **FSNE Strengths and Accomplishments in California**

Through the California Department of Social Services, DHS has established the *California Nutrition Network* and a fiscal and programmatic infrastructure that qualifies California agencies for Federal Financial Participation (FFP) for FSNE. It supports a statewide nutrition education campaign that targets FSNE-eligible California families with children. The *Network* and special *California 5 a Day Campaigns* are funded through this mechanism as a large public/private partnership that has developed FSNE-targeted campaigns linked to the *National 5 A Day Program*. Our goals are to use customized, science-based social marketing techniques to increase fruit and vegetable consumption and daily physical activity in FSNE-eligible families with children.

### **Program Results and Success:**

These approaches are yielding results. The latest statewide data show that in just the four years from 1999 to 2003, 9- to 11-year old children from Food Stamp families who are targeted by the *Network* and the *5 a Day—Power Play! Campaign (Power Play!)* have become twice as likely to eat 5 or more servings of fruits and vegetables daily as children from higher income homes, and these children also report much higher rates of physical activity. Notably, only the low-income children targeted by *Power Play!* and other *Network* school FSNE programs are reporting these improvements.

The statewide trend is similar in low-income California adults where higher fruit and vegetable intake was reported during the same time period—in contrast to middle and higher income adults. Nationally, adult fruit and vegetable consumption trends are generally flat or trending downward, so it appears that something positive and different is happening in California for lower-income residents.

For FSNE-eligible children and adults, improvements in nutrition behavior track with statewide increases in intervention activity through the *Network*. The good news is that these efforts appear to be working. It is essential that we learn from the success of these programs and work together – State and Federal Government – to implement cost effective, targeted nutrition education and marketing activities, using a social ecological approach that have proven effectiveness in reaching Food Stamp populations and in actually changing behavior.

### **How Can We Achieve Further Improvements?**

The 2007 Farm Bill provides a genuine opportunity to strengthen FSNE and the Food Stamp Program for generations to come; to better support achievement of the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*; and help to achieve our mutual goal to improve the nutrition of low-income families. California endorses the recommendation from the Office of Management and Budget's 2004 Food Stamp Program Performance Assessment that nutrition education programs should have a clear national strategy "*with an emphasis on interventions with proven effectiveness*", and the conclusions of the April 2004 Government Accountability Report to the United States Senate regarding nutrition education that highlighted necessary components of nutrition education.

Within the *Guiding Principles* for FSNE released last month, USDA encourages states to use a variety of approaches in their delivery of FSNE, and it recognizes the importance of comprehensive approaches to deliver nutrition education for Food Stamp users. We strongly agree and recommend that the 2007 Farm Bill provide authorization to reimburse states through FSNE for implementing comprehensive, cost effective activities that include science-based intervention strategies aimed at the individual, organizational, community and societal levels. In particular, specific recommendations are as follows:

1. **The 2007 Farm Bill should modernize provisions for Food Stamp Nutrition Education to appropriately address the needs of today's Food Stamp households and establish Food Stamps as a principal nutrition solution to the obesity epidemic impacting low-income families.**

The Food Stamp environment has changed dramatically since the early 1980s, as has intervention science. For example, over half of California adults currently receiving Food Stamps are working poor who do not receive public cash assistance (welfare), and well over half live outside census tracts that now qualify as sites for offering FSNE. From a scientific and cost efficiency perspective, it's clear that the traditional approach of education alone is not enough, and effective nutrition education must tackle the complex set of factors that impact an individual's ability to make healthy choices. Learning lessons from business and private sector, FSNE programs should utilize targeted marketing and education approaches that can reach more Food Stamp eligible individuals at a lower cost per person, changing social norms and promoting environments where the healthy choice is the easy choice, with policy changes that result in permanent healthy change.

The 2007 Farm Bill should support Food Stamp Nutrition Education that:

- Reaches "certified", "likely" and "potentially-eligible" Food Stamp households, defined as those with incomes up to 185 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). Program flexibility should allow for fluctuating incomes of low-income families and fixed expenses such as housing, transportation, and utilities that can make working poor households intermittently eligible for Food Stamps;
- Provides FSNE programs in many different community locations that reach high proportions of FSNE-eligible persons where food and physical activity decisions are made. Current provisions preclude FSNE from being offered to the nearly two-thirds of FSNE-eligible adults who live outside qualifying low-income census tracts, even in the grocery stores where the majority of Food Stamps are spent or in low-wage worksites which—similar to school settings for children—are effective, efficient sites for delivering nutrition and physical activity interventions. If current law does not provide USDA with flexibility it needs to allow more flexible targeting in states or allow an alternate methodology based on Food Stamps usage data, then that authority should be added to the Farm Bill;
- Includes effective physical activity and community food security interventions, as well as those for healthy eating, and addresses the community barriers that FSNE-eligible populations face as part of a comprehensive FSNE program;
- Promotes the use of scientifically-sound, consumer-driven, targeted low-income population approaches that include mass media advertising, public relations, marketing and promotion, community development, public/private partnerships, and policy, systems, and environmental change – as well as traditional education. This combination approach is necessary to promote healthy behavior, de-normalize unhealthy conditions, and create environments where healthy eating and physical activity become easy, safe, enjoyable choices in low-income communities; and



- Supports effective program delivery by embracing and capitalizing on the respective assets and interests of each level of government participating in FSNE; ensures flexibility to meet regional, state and local needs; and breaks through unnecessary silos that limit program performance.
2. **The 2007 Farm Bill should eliminate the administrative firewall that separates Food Stamp Nutrition Education from Outreach to ensure streamlined participation in nutrition assistance programs for low-income families.**

The present restriction on using available FSNE dollars for Food Stamp Outreach and promotion, or to help increase participation in the other nutrition assistance programs that serve Food Stamp families – school lunch and breakfast, summer meals and after-school snacks – limits program effectiveness and efficiency. Removing the firewall would promote coordination, improve efficiency, build on implementation of automatic enrollment strategies and increase participation by families who need better access to healthy food. The federal nutrition assistance programs are under-utilized in California; FSNE is in-place and can serve as a natural and efficient means to promote other FNS programs and reach out to eligible Californians.

3. **The 2007 Farm Bill should be designed to maximize the successful adoption of the *2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, most notably to increase promotion and availability of fruits, vegetables and other healthy but under-consumed foods to low-income families in the marketplace.**

Specific examples include:

- Implement market-based Food Stamp retail innovations such as Bonus Value Food Stamps for customers buying fruits and vegetables, removing the prohibition against offering sale prices for healthy foods to Food Stamp customers, and allowing states to exceed federal nutrition standards for Food Stamp-certified retailers, as is allowed with WIC;
- Require that certified farmers' markets in low-income areas be equipped to redeem Food Stamp benefits through Electronic Benefit Transfer, and strengthen WIC and Senior farmers' market programs;
- Allow FSNE to support statewide Farm-to-School and Community-Supported Agriculture programs that develop and increase direct marketing opportunities to small farmers and related businesses, especially in low-income and children's foodservice venues;
- Re-calculate the cost of the USDA Thrifty Food Plan to include the healthier foods required by the *2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, especially fresh fruits and vegetables;
- Promptly implement Institute of Medicine recommendations to add fruits and vegetables to the WIC food package;
- Expand the Free Fruit and Vegetable Snack Program to all states, including California; and

- Authorize Specialty Crop Block Grant funds to state agriculture departments, including for statewide promotion of fruits and vegetables to the general public through efforts such as *5 a Day Campaigns*.

In closing, through the Food Stamp Program, Food Stamp Nutrition Education, and our partnership with USDA, the *Network* has provided DHS with the opportunity to develop partnerships with the food and agriculture industry and with community organizations; to create a state and local infrastructure to deliver and evaluate interventions; and to provide leadership within an otherwise fragmented landscape.

As outlined above, changes in 2007 are recommended to maintain these achievements, to build upon them, and to create lasting change for our Food Stamp eligible target population. Together we have an opportunity to achieve lasting change for low-income families: to improve educational attainment of children; greater work productivity of adults; provide an economic stimulus in low-income communities through increased participation in federal nutrition assistance programs; and over time, help reduce rising health care costs caused by poor nutrition, physical inactivity, obesity, and related chronic diseases among lower-income Californians.

DHS appreciates the opportunity to share our work. Should further information be needed, please contact Susan B. Foerster, MPH, RD, Chief, or David Ginsburg, MPH, Assistant Chief, Cancer Prevention and Nutrition Section, at (916) 449-5400.

Thank you.